



U.S. AIR FORCE

This Week in USAF and PACAF History **23 – 29 April 2012**



29 Apr 1918 **Lt. Edward V. Rickenbacker**, the leading U.S. ace of World War I with 26 victories, **shot down his first airplane**. Some little-known items on the “**Ace of Aces**” –

Rickenbacker’s father died when he was still a boy. A few years later, Eddie got a job road-testing cars, which led him into auto racing and to his original nickname “Fast Eddie” (he preferred “Rick”). At the start of World War I, he changed his name from the Germanic “Reichenbacher” to “Rickenbacker.” He traveled to England in 1916 to develop an English racing car, and was closely monitored by counter-intelligence agents.

Rickenbacker had already enlisted in the Army when the U.S. entered the war. Rickenbacker wanted to fly and suggested that the Army man a combat flying unit with racing drivers, but the Army refused. Most pilot candidates were graduates of prestigious colleges, but after repairing a car carrying Colonel Billy Mitchell, Rickenbacker got his wish to transfer to an aviation unit. However, he was designated an engineering officer and could practice flying only during his free time. His superiors finally allowed him to get his wings after he proved that he had a qualified replacement. Rickenbacker (photo at right) eventually commanded the 94th “Hat in the Ring” Squadron.



25-26 Apr 1944 Lieutenant Carter Harman of the 1st Air Commando Group (standing at left in the photo) rescued four men from the Burmese jungle in the **first U.S. Army Air Forces combat rescue by helicopter**.



In late April 1944, a 1st Air Commando plane crash-landed deep behind Japanese lines in Burma with three wounded British soldiers aboard. Lt. Harman flew his helicopter from his base in India on a circuitous 500-mile route to avoid Japanese forces. He had to stop for fuel every 100 miles at landing zones cut out of the Burma jungles by allied ground commandos. Harman flew to a clearing near the crash site, picked up the first British soldier

and took him to an emergency strip prepared by British commandos on a sand-bar 10 miles away. He went back and picked up the second soldier, but an overheated engine forced him to put off further flights that day and remain at the sandbar overnight. He went back the next morning to get the third soldier and then went back again and got the L-IB pilot.

26 Apr 1949 Lt. General George E. Stratemeyer became **Commanding General, Far East Air Forces**, Tokyo, taking over from Lt. Gen. Ennis G. Whitehead. Gen Stratemeyer remained as the FEAF Commander until 9 June 1951. His book, “The Three Wars of Lt. Gen. George E. Stratemeyer: His Korean War Diary,” is available at the Air Force Historical Studies Office.



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23 Apr 1965 The first operational **C-141 Starlifter** was delivered to Travis AFB, California.



Capable of crossing any ocean nonstop at more than 500 miles per hour, the Starlifter could transport up to 70,000 pounds of payload, including 154 troops, 123 paratroopers, or a combination of troops and supplies. The C-141 replaced slower, piston-engined cargo planes in both strategic and tactical airlift missions, and it provided critical support to U.S. forces in Vietnam and Southwest Asia.

26 Apr 1966 **The Navy leaves MAC.** The SECDEF approved a joint recommendation by the Air Force and Navy to discontinue Navy participation in the Military Airlift Command.

26 Apr 1966 **First MiG-21 kill.** An F-4C crew used Sidewinder missiles to shoot down a MiG-21 over North Vietnam. Major Paul J. Gilmore and 1st Lieutenant William T. Smith of the 35th Tactical Fighter Wing were escorting F-105 Thunderchiefs near Hanoi when the MiGs attacked. (MiG-21 photo at right.)



27 Apr 1972 **Smart Bomb Milestone.** Four USAF fighter crews, releasing Paveway I laser-guided “smart” bombs, knocked down the Thanh Hoa bridge in North Vietnam. Previously, 871 conventional sorties had inflicted only superficial damage to the bridge.

24 Apr 1980 **Operation EAGLE CLAW.** More than 50 American hostages were being held by militant Iranians at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. An extremely complex rescue plan was prepared. Air Force special operations C-130s were to insert Army Rangers at a site in central Iran (“Desert One”) and also to secure an airfield near Tehran. Navy RH-53 helicopters flown by Marine pilots were to follow the C-130s to the site in central Iran, get refueled by the C-130s and then fly the Rangers to a hide site near Tehran. CIA agents would truck the Rangers to the embassy for the rescue. The Rangers and hostages would move to a nearby soccer stadium where they would be picked up by the helicopters and fly to the secured airfield. The helicopters were to be destroyed and all personnel would then leave Iran on USAF C-141 transports. Air Force AC-130 gunships were to provide close air support for the rescue, helicopter extraction and the seizure of the airfield, and Navy fighters were to cover the withdrawal of the C-141s.

On 24 April 1980, the attempt to rescue the hostages was aborted after night-time sandstorms and mechanical difficulties reduced the number of RH-53 helicopters to an insufficient force. As U.S. forces prepared to withdraw, an RH-53 collided with a C-130 on the dark, windy landing site in Iran, killing eight servicemen. The entire force was then extracted on the C-130s.



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Colonel James Kyle, USAF, Desert One on-scene commander, from his book *The Guts to Try*: “The C-130 crews and combat controllers had not failed in any part of the operation and had a right to be proud of what they accomplished,” Kyle said. “They inserted the rescue team into Iran on schedule, set up the refueling zone, and gassed up the helicopters when they finally arrived. Then, when things went sour, they saved the day with an emergency evacuation by some incredibly skillful flying. They had gotten the forces out of Iran to fight another day — a fact they can always look back on with pride.”



Members of the 8th Special Operations Squadron who died in Operation Eagle Claw were (left to right): Capt. Richard Bakke, Tech. Sgt. Joel Mayo, Capt. Lyn McIntosh, Capt. Hal Lewis and Capt. Charles McMillan. See the USAF article: [Hurlburt remembers Operation Eagle Claw.](#)

23 Apr 2001 An **RQ-4A Global Hawk** completed the first nonstop trans-Pacific flight by an unmanned air vehicle (UAV). The aircraft flew from the Air Force Flight Test Center at Edwards AFB, California to Edinburgh, Australia, covering the 7,500 miles in about 23 hours. The flight demonstrated the Global Hawk’s high-altitude, long-range capabilities. (See USAF Global Hawk photo at right).



28 Apr 2003 **End of Operation SOUTHERN WATCH.** Coinciding with the end of the enforcement of the no-fly zone in southern Iraq, the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) at Prince Sultan AB, Saudi Arabia, moved to Al Udeid AB, Qatar. This CAOC had responsibility for all air operations in Southwest Asia. On 29 April, at a joint news conference in Riyadh, SECDEF Donald Rumsfeld and Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz announced the withdrawal of all U.S. combat forces from Saudi Arabia – ending 12 years of continuous American presence.

On 1 May, **Operation NORTHERN WATCH** at Incirlik AB, Turkey also came to a close.